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The School Breakfast Program in Title I Schools

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE / FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE / WASHINGTON, D.C.
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WHAT IS THE SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM?

The federally funded School Breakfast Program makes nutritious breakfasts available to children at school. The program was created in 1966 on a pilot basis for several special categories of schools. It was made permanent in 1975, and now guarantees funding to all interested public and nonprofit private schools.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which runs the program at the Federal level, establishes regulations and distributes funds to each State education department. Local school districts, or, in some cases, individual schools apply to their State agency to run the program. Participating schools agree to make breakfasts available to all interested students at or before the beginning of the school day. The breakfasts must meet minimal Federal nutritional standards. Each breakfast must include a serving of milk; whole grain or enriched bread products or cereal; fruit or vegetable or fruit or vegetable juice; and, whenever possible, additional protein-rich foods.

Children who participate in the program either pay the full price that is established by their school or receive breakfast free or at a reduced price, depending on their family's income. USDA reimburses participating schools up to a certain set rate for each free, reduced price, and paid breakfast that they serve. The schools can use these funds to cover the costs of operating the breakfast program, including costs of food, preparation, supervision, and cleanup. Most schools are able to finance their programs with the money available from the Federal Government and the students' payments.

Schools that are unable to cover costs with the regular reimbursement payments and the students' payments may be eligible to receive extra "severe need" funds. Each State sets its own guidelines for these additional funds. At a minimum, the "severe need" category must include schools that are required by State law to run a breakfast program and schools that serve 40 percent or more of their lunches free or at a reduced price.

WHY IS BREAKFAST IMPORTANT AND WHY SHOULD IT BE SERVED AT SCHOOL?

Studies indicate that children perform better if they have eaten breakfast. In a review of many of the studies done on children's need for breakfast, a professor of nutrition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said: "The studies that focused on the short-term effects of hunger or morning feeding suggest that the provision of breakfast may both benefit the student emotionally and enhance his/her capacity to work on [scholastic] tasks."

Many school administrators, teachers, school nurses, and school food service directors also extol the value of breakfast for schoolchildren. According to Dr. Robert Brown, Superintendent of the Greene County Board of Education in Alabama: "This breakfast program is the best thing to happen to our school district. We have had a marked increase in average daily school attendance and our [students who walk in] are now on time. The sluggishness of some of our students has decreased and so have our headache complaints. We have also noted an increase in physical education activity and participation. Generally, our students are in a better mood and ready to go to work after eating breakfast at school."

Recent surveys indicate that many children come to school without eating an adequate breakfast or without eating any breakfast. In 1977, the Minnesota State Senate's Subcommittee on Nutrition, in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Education, conducted a survey of 90,000 children. Survey results indicated that only 14 percent of the children who were surveyed ate an adequate breakfast at home. A 1979 survey that was conducted by the Luck, Wisconsin, Board of Education revealed that between 14.5 and 47.7 percent of the district's students came to school without having eaten breakfast. Numerous other surveys, including statewide surveys conducted in Massachusetts, Utah, and Wisconsin, underscore these findings.

There are many reasons why children arrive at school without having eaten an adequate breakfast or any breakfast. Many students travel long distances to school and do not have time to eat, or are not hungry before they leave home. In families where both parents work, the demands of morning schedules can make preparing breakfast difficult or impossible. Also, some families simply cannot afford to prepare breakfast.

WHY DOES IT MAKE SENSE FOR TITLE I SCHOOLS TO OFFER THE USDA SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM?

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act seeks to expand and improve elementary and secondary school programs for educationally deprived children. The School Breakfast Program seems to be a perfect complement to Title I. The School Breakfast Program guarantees that these children start their day with adequate nourishment, so that they can concentrate on the special educational assistance that Title I provides.

According to House Report 95-1137, Congress intended that the assessment of educational need should identify all factors contributing to low academic achievement. As stated in the report: "This step should also identify whether certain special needs could best be met through noninstructional support services." If hunger is one of those needs, then the School Breakfast Program can meet that need.

Having the School Breakfast Program in Title I schools makes sense for two other important reasons. First, schools that take advantage of USDA's food programs don't have to spend Title I funds on food service. Second, Title I dollars will not be wasted trying to teach children who can't concentrate because they are hungry.

The School Breakfast Program can be a worthwhile project for Parent Advisory Councils (PAC's) to work on. Once the program is set up, parents can participate as volunteer or paid breakfast aides. (USDA's reimbursement may be used to pay breakfast aides.) A school may find the breakfast program to be a first step towards bringing about more parental involvement.

HOW CAN TITLE I SCHOOLS START A SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM?

Any public or private nonprofit school can have a breakfast program. No limit can be set on the number of children who get breakfast or on the number of schools that serve breakfast in a school district. The only requirement is that the School Board must apply to the State School Food Services Director, who must approve the school for funding at once.

Any interested person or group can seek a School Breakfast Program at a Title I school. A Title I Coordinator, a parent, or a teacher can raise the idea at a PAC meeting. The PAC can then prepare a report for the Superintendent and the School Board based on discussions with parents, students, and school personnel, and on information from schools that already have the program.

After the School Board approves the breakfast program, it applies to the State School Food Services Director at the State Department of Education. In many States, those schools that are already operating the National School Lunch Program merely fill in an additional line on the school lunch form to indicate their entry into the breakfast program. In any case, starting up a breakfast program requires very little paperwork.

The following Title I administrators and PAC members have had experience with the School Breakfast Program and would be glad to answer your questions:

Gerard A. Cartier, Federal Aid Coordinator, Woonsocket Department of Education, 70 North Main Street, Woonsocket, Rhode Island 02895 - (401)766-5531

Ella Creek, Title I Liaison, and Miriam Green, Principal, Baybrook Elementary School, 4301 Tenth Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21225 - (301)396-1357

Cornelia McGee, PAC member, Alabama Coalition Against Hunger, 15-C McKenzie Courts, Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35401 - (205)758-1296

In addition, you can contact any of the following agencies for more information on starting up and monitoring the School Breakfast Program:

The National and Regional Offices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service

School Programs Division
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
Washington, D.C. 20250

Telephone: (202)447-9065

Mr. Robert J. Nelson
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Midwest Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
536 South Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois 60605

Telephone: (312)353-6673

Mr. R. J. Freiler
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Mid-Atlantic Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
One Vahlsing Center
Robbinsville, New Jersey 08691

Telephone: (609)259-3041

Mr. Brian Allison
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Mountain Plains Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
2420 West 26th Avenue, Room 430-D
Denver, Colorado 80211

Telephone: (303)837-5071

Mr. John Ghiorzi
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
New England Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
33 North Avenue
Burlington, Massachusetts 01803

Telephone: (617)272-0861

Mr. Charles C. Kirby
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Southeast Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
1100 Spring Street NW.
Atlanta, Georgia 30309

Telephone: (404)881-4911

Mr. Hap Pullium
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Southwest Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
1100 Commerce Street
Dallas, Texas 75202

Telephone: (214)767-0234

Mr. Jack Bradley
Regional Director
Special Nutrition Programs
Western Regional Office
Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
550 Kearny Street
San Francisco, California 94108

Telephone: (415)556-4956

The Children's Foundation
School Food Advocacy Project
1420 New York Avenue NW., Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20005

Telephone: (202)347-3300

The Children's Foundation
P.O. Box 5757
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502

Telephone: (505)988-9686

The Children's Foundation
88 Walton Street NW.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Telephone: (404)552-2232

The National Child Nutrition Project
46 Bayard Street
New Brunswick, New Jersey 08901

Telephone: (201)846-1161

The Food Research and Action Center
2011 Eye Street NW.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Telephone: (202)452-8250

The State Child Nutrition Program Office in Each State

Mr. T. G. Smith
Coordinator
Child Nutrition Programs
State Department of Education
410 State Office Building
Montgomery, Alabama 36130

Telephone: (205)832-3321

Mrs. E. Ruth Benigno
School Food Coordinator
State Department of Education
Pouch F
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Telephone: (907)465-2856

Mrs. Letea Tuaolo
Director
Food Services Programs
Department of Education
Pago Pago, Tutuila, American Samoa

Telephone: (Operator) 633-4963

Mrs. Junetta Barrett
Director
Food Nutrition Division
Department of Education
1535 West Jefferson Street
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

Telephone: (602)255-3362

Mr. Doyle Border
Coordinator
School Food Services
State Department of Education
403 East Education Building
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Telephone: (501)371-2466

Mrs. L. Gene White
Director
Office of Food and Nutrition Services
State Department of Education
721 Capitol Mall
Sacramento, California 95814

Telephone: (916)445-0850

Mr. Daniel G. Wisotzkey
Director
School Food Services and Supportive Services
Colorado State Department of Education
201 East Colfax Street
318 State Office Building
Denver, Colorado 80203

Telephone: (303)839-2217

Mrs. Ann Tolman
Director
Child Nutrition Programs
State Department of Education
165 Capitol Avenue
Hartford, Connecticut 06115

Telephone: (203)566-3195

Mr. Robert L. John
State Supervisor of Food Services
Department of Public Instruction
John G. Townsend Building, Room 265
Federal and Lockerman Streets
Dover, Delaware 19901

Telephone: (302)678-4718

Mr. Shelton Lee
Acting Director
Department of Food Services
Public Schools of The District of Columbia
3535 V Street NE.
Washington, D.C. 20018

Telephone: (202)576-7400

Mr. George A. Hockenbery
Administrator
Food and Nutrition Management
State Department of Education
319 Nott Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32304

Telephone: (904)488-7647

Miss Annette Bomar
Administrator
School Food and Nutrition Section
State Department of Education
156 Trinity Avenue SW.
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Telephone: (404)656-2457

Ms. Eleanor K. Smith
Associate Superintendent, Food Services
Department of Education
Government of Guam
P. O. Box DE
Agana, Guam 96910

Telephone: (Operator) 477-9240

Mr. Stanley W. Doucette
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Education
1106 Koko Head Avenue
Honolulu, Hawaii 96804

Telephone: (808)732-5868

Mr. Cecil F. Olsen
Director
Food Services Branch
State Department of Education
Len B. Jordan Office Building, Room 213
650 West State Street
Boise, Idaho 83720

Telephone: (208)384-2203

Mr. Robert E. Ohlzen
Manager
School Food Services Section
Illinois Office of Education
100 North First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62777

Telephone: (217)782-2491

Mr. John J. Harter
Director
Division of School Food and Nutrition Programs
State Department of Public Instruction
State House, Room 229
Indianapolis, Indiana 46024

Telephone: (317)633-6613

Mr. Verne E. Carpenter
Director
Child Nutrition Programs Division
State Department of Public Instruction
Grimes State Office Building
Des Moines, Iowa 50319

Telephone: (515)281-5357

Mrs. Rita Hamman
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Education
Kansas State Education Building
120 East Tenth Street
Topeka, Kansas 66612

Telephone: (913)296-2276

Mr. Redwood Taylor
Director
Division of School Food Services
Bureau of Administration and Finance
State Department of Education
Capitol Plaza, 19th Floor
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

Telephone: (502)564-4390

Dr. Harold Denning
Director
Local School System Services
State Department of Education
626 North Fourth Street
P. O. Box 44064
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70804

Telephone: (504)389-6050

Miss Gene West
Director
School Nutrition Programs
State Department of Education
Education Building
Augusta, Maine 04333

Telephone: (207)289-2371

Mrs. Joan H. Weatherholtz
Coordinator
Food and Nutrition Section
State Department of Education
6510 Elkridge Landing Road
Linthicum, Maryland 21090

Telephone: (301)796-8300 - (ext. 260)

Mr. John C. Stalker
Director
Bureau of Nutrition Education and
School Food Services
State Department of Education
31 St. James Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

Telephone: (617)727-5764

Mr. Roger Lynas
Supervisor
Food and Nutrition Programs
School Management of Education
116 1/2 South Washington Street
P. O. Box 30008
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Telephone: (517)373-3347

Mr. Charles L. Matthew
Director
Child Nutrition Section
State Department of Education
Capitol Square Building, Room 509
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101

Telephone: (612)296-6986

Mr. John H. Walker
Assistant Director
Administration and Finance
State Department of Education
Walter Sillers Office Building, Room 604
550 High Street
P. O. Box 771
Jackson, Mississippi 39205

Telephone: (601)354-6916

Mr. Wilbert Grannemann
Director
School Food Services
Department of Elementary and
Secondary Education
Jefferson Building
100 East Capitol Avenue
Jefferson City, Missouri 65101

Telephone: (314)751-3526

Mr. H. Brisbin Skiles
Supervisor
School Food Services
Office of Public Instruction
State Capitol
Helena, Montana 59601

Telephone: (406)449-2501

Dr. Ray Steinert
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Education
233 South Tenth Street
Lincoln, Nebraska 68509

Telephone: (402)867-2486

Mr. James Menath
Director of Food Services
State Department of Education
400 West King Street Capitol Complex
Carson City, Nevada 89710

Telephone: (702)885-5700

Dr. Lloyd Littlefield
Director
Food and Nutrition Services
Division of Administration
410 State House Annex
105 Loudon Road, Building #4
Concord, New Hampshire 03301

Telephone: (603)271-2140

Mr. Walter F. Colender
Director
Bureau of Child Nutrition Programs
Division of Field Services
State Department of Education
225 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

Telephone: (609)292-8527

Mr. John Trojacek
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Education
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503

Telephone: (505)827-2591

Mr. Richard O. Reed
Chief
Bureau of School Food Management
State Department of Education
99 Washington Avenue, Room 1736
Albany, New York 12230

Telephone: (518)474-1566

Mr. Ralph W. Eaton
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Public Instruction
Education Building
Raleigh, North Carolina 27611

Telephone: (919)733-7162

Miss Roberta A. Bosch
Director
School Food Services
State Department of Public Instruction
State Capitol Building
Bismarck, North Dakota 58505

Telephone: (701)224-2294

Mr. Robert H. Koon
Director
Division of School Lunch
State Department of Education
65 South Front Street, Room 1009
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Telephone: (614)521-3327

Mr. Fred L. Jones
Director
School Lunch Section
State Department of Education
2500 North Lincoln Boulevard
Oliver Hodge Memorial Education Building
Room 340
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

Telephone: (405)521-3327

Mr. Richards S. Miller
Coordinator
School Food and Nutrition Services
Oregon State Department of Education
924 Lancaster Drive NE., Room 212
Salem, Oregon 97310

Telephone: (503)378-3577

Mr. Warren M. Vann, Jr
Chief
Division of Food and Nutrition Services
State Department of Education
P. O. Box 911
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17126

Telephone: (717)787-1415

Miss Maria J. Laboy
Directress
School Lunchroom Division
Department of Education
URB Industrial Tres Monjitas
P. O. Box 759
Hato Rey, Puerto Rico 00919

Telephone: (809)767-0144

Mr. Robert F. Kaveny
Program Business Manager
Office of School Food Services
Roger Williams Building
22 Hayes Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

Telephone: (401)277-2711

Ms. Vivian Pilant
Director
Office of School Food Services
State Department of Education
305 Rutledge Building
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Telephone: (803)758-2346

Mr. Gary Rhead
Administrator
School Food Services
Department of Education and Cultural Affairs
Division of Elementary and Secondary Education
State Office Building #3
Pierre, South Dakota 57501

Telephone: (605)224-3413

Director
School Food Services
State Department of Education
Cordell Hull Building, Room 117
Nashville, Tennessee 37219

Telephone: (615)741-2927

Mr. Charles A. Cole
Director
School Lunch Program
Texas Education Agency
201 East 11th Street
Austin, Texas 78701

Telephone: (512)475-4363

Linda Parkinson
Food Service Officer
Department of Education
Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands
Saipan, Mariana Islands 96950

Mr. Hank Winawer
Coordinator
School Food Services
250 East 500 South
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

Telephone: (801)533-5471

Miss Banba Foley
Chief
Child Nutrition Programs
State Department of Education
State Office Building
120 State Street
Montpelier, Vermont 05602

Telephone: (802)828-2447

Mrs. Gail Rivera
Director
School Lunch Program
Department of Education
175 Estate Annas Retreat
Charlotte Amilie
St. Thomas, Virgin Islands 00801

Telephone: (809)774-5339

Mr. John F. Miller
Supervisor
School Food Services
State Department of Education
Eighth and Broad Streets, Room 302
Richmond, Virginia 23216

Telephone: (804)936-2604

Miss Virginia R. Whitlatch
Director
School Food Services
Department of Public Instruction
Old Capitol Building
Olympia, Washington 98504

Telephone: (206)753-3580

Mrs. Faith Gravenmier
Director
Child Nutrition Programs
State Department of Education
Building #6, Room B-248
1900 Washington Street East
Charleston, West Virginia 25305

Telephone: (304)348-2708

Mr. Edward J. Post
Director
Bureau for School Food Services
Department of Public Instruction
126 Langdon Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53703

Telephone: (608)266-3500

Mr. John Harper
Acting Coordinator
Assistant Superintendent of Administrative
Services
State Department of Education
Hathaway Building, Room 284
Cheyenne, Wyoming 82002

Telephone: (307)777-7293

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